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The Mysterious Ways of Wang Foo

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THE JADE-STONE PENDANT.

"CAPTAIN," said the inspector, as he rose from his office chair and, turning toward the long open window, gazed out over the blue waters of the harbor, "we might just as well give it up. It is the most puzzling case I have ever had since I came to the far east, just seventeen years ago this month."

And Inspector Wallace of the Hongkong police, reaching up to a little Chinese ebony shelf upon the wall, took from it a long Manila cheroot and, slowly and thoughtfully lighting it, watched the Peninsular mail steamer maneuvering toward her anchorage amid the forest of shipping.

"Yes, it certainly is a deep one," answered Capt. Brownlow, second in command, and, like his chief, a veteran of the Indian army. "We certainly have made a very thorough search. Every dive of stolen goods and every pawnshop in the colony has been combed, but there isn't the faintest trace of it. And here," pointing to a file of letters upon the desk, "here are the confidential reports from the vice consuls at Canton and Macao. They say they have done their best, but they are just as much in the dark as we are. There's only one thing left, sir; we'll have to send for Wang Foo."

"You are right, captain. It takes a Chinaman to catch a Chinaman, as the old saying goes. Look him up and meet me here at 9 tonight sharp. I am dining on the flag ship and will excuse myself early."

While the foregoing conversation was taking place in the police inspector's private office Lady Evington, wife of the governor of the colony, was just bidding good-bye to the wife and the daughter of the admiral at Government House.

"Yes, I have about made up my mind that I shall never see it again," she said. "The inspector told the governor this afternoon that he considered it practically a hopeless case."

"And you are quite positive that it wasn't stolen at the reception?" asked one of the women.

"Quite positive," answered Lady Evington. "I remember distinctly looking at it and admiring its rich green color just before I laid it away in the case on my dressing table, after the last visitor had gone. And," she added, with a great deal of emphasis, "I know one of the servants could not possibly have taken it, for my door was securely locked and bolted."

The article in question, that had so mysteriously disappeared from Lady Evington's dressing table two weeks before, was nothing less than the famous jade-stone pendant that the viceroy of Canton had presented to the Governor of Hongkong in recognition of his excellency's services in conducting the campaign for the relief of the thousands of sufferers from the great Pearl river flood. It was a wonderful jewel, of almost priceless value, and had for no end of years been part of the official insignia of the viceroys of Canton, hanging from the center of a necklace of coral, over the gold-embroidered phoenix on the ceremonial robes.

The gift had been elaborately described in the English papers of Hongkong, and the notices had been translated into all the native papers of the colony and of Shanghai, and it was generally recognized that no more striking token of appreciation had ever been presented by a Chinese high official to a foreign ruler.

His excellency, Sir Arthur Wayne-Evington, the governor, had kept it securely locked in his office safe until the evening of the reception to the officers of the army and navy, when Lady Evington wore it for the first time in public. She had laid it on her dressing table just before retiring, and in the morning it had mysteriously vanished. That was all she knew. And that was all that any one knew, although the entire official staff of attendants and servants had been most rigorously examined and cross-questioned. And so "The Theft of the Vice-Regal Jade-Stone," as the heading in the papers ran, became the subject of gossip and speculation all up and down the eastern coast, from Singapore to Peking.

Capt. Brownlow returned to his home after the interview, and summoning his faithful servant, Ah Sing, said:

"You savee Wang Foo, go catchee four piecee chair-coolie, my wantchee go his house very chop-chop."

"You wantchee him catchee tiefman?" asked the ever-inquisitive Ah Sing.

"Never you mind what my wantchee," replied the captain, passing from his pidgin English into the more regular tongue of his mother country. "Get the chair ready quick, and mind you don't tell any one where we are going."

The light open-work sedan was got ready in a very few minutes and swinging on the shoulders of four stalwart coolies. The captain, followed by the faithful Ah Sing with a lantern, passed rapidly down Queen's road until they reached the avenue of fragrant waters, and turning to the left began the steep ascent of the alley of the Red Cloud, stopping at last in front of a little doorway that bore the thrice interwoven symbol of "5-5-5," the Chinese emblem of good luck.

The coolies quickly put down the chair and, pulling their bamboo pipes from their girdles, sat down to smoke around the lantern of Ah Sing, while the captain knocked at the door and was immediately admitted.

"Good evening, grandma," he said, with a smile, to the venerable figure who drew back the double bars, for some missionary had told him that that was always a polite form of address to any Chinese dame who had reached the age of fifty. "Is Wang Foo at home?"

"The lord of our humble mansion is waiting to receive you," was the answer, as she ushered him into the little reception room and hastened to get ready the water-pipe and the inevitable bowl of scalding green tea. The officer took the proffered chair, and soon a footstep was heard descending the narrow stairs that led into the upper loft, where the humble citizens of Hongkong spend the sweet hours of night. Wang Foo, the man of mystery, stood before him.

Tall and slender and light of weight, clad in a long blue gown of delicate blue silk with an upper jacket of the lightest yellow, neatly braided cue with a tassel of white (indicating mourning for a parent), the host had all the dress and manner of the perfect Chinese gentleman. His face was the traditional oval, nose rather sharper than usual among his countrymen, while the high cheek bones would have located him in the northern rather than in the southern provinces. His skin was as smooth as a child's, except on the forehead, where it bore traces of an ugly wound received many years before in an accident. But the eyes—these were what attracted the captain's attention, as they did that of every one who ever talked with him. Narrow and slightly almond-turned at the outer edge, they were as piercing as an eagle's, and seemed—almost chameleon-like—to change their color with every changing glance. No one could have told their exact color, even in the strongest sunlight. And the hands (he put out one of them to grasp the captain's) were as long and slender as those of the fairy princess in the Chinese tales of childhood, with tapering nails of the most delicate coral pink. He would have been an interesting character study at any time or in any place; he was doubly so now.

"Good evening, captain," he said, with a most gracious smile of welcome, before the English officer had had time to say a word. "I am highly honored to have you under my very humble roof. Please take a seat and let me know how I may have the pleasure of serving you. You surely haven't come to consult me about the robbery at government house, have you?"

"That's just it," replied the captain. "We may as well confess it, we're in a fix, and you seem to be the only one that can help us out."

"Did the inspector himself send you for me?" inquired Wang.

"He did, sir, and he is anxious to see you about it. Of couse, you know about the case?"

"I have read about it in the English papers," was the brief and characteristic answer.

At this point grandma suddenly appeared with the Chinese brass pipe, which she placed before them on the table, with two bowls of smoking Foo Chow tea and a little tray containing some cigarettes for the use of the foreigner not accustomed to the native pipe. The host politely passed them to his guest, and after a few minutes' conversation on the weather and the ordinary topics of the day, the captain arose to leave.

"At what hour, Mr. Wang, may I tell the inspector to await you?"

"Say to him, with my very best compliments, that he may look for me at precisely 9 o'clock tomorrow morning."

"At his office, I suppose?"

"Yes, at his office."

"Good-night."

"Good-night, sir, and, as the Chinese say, may lucky stars guide you on your way!"

As the captain rode along Queen's road on his way home he kept saying to himself:

"Wonderful man, that Wang. No doubt, he knows all about his countrymen and their tricky ways, but where did he get that smooth and polished English? Not a syllable of 'pidgin' the whole time I was there. Why, he speaks as correctly as an English schoolmarm."

He did not know that Wang had learned his first English from the bishop's own daughter in the old mission on the Bund, and polished and refined it afterward by a two-year residence in Melbourne. Long and faithful study had made him a master of it, as he was of his own ancestral tongue and its complicated literature.

"Venerable grand one," he said, addressing the old lady, who had bolted the door after the departure of the foreigner, "where is old Chang?"

"He is resting in the outer court."

"Call him at once, and tell him to go to the Temple of the Queen of Heaven and ask for the abbot, and say that Wang Foo desires the honor of his presence without delay."

"It is done as the master says."

In scarcely twenty minutes' time the old abbot arrived, and after the tea and pipes they ascended the rickety stairs to the upper loft.

"Welcome, venerable father, to the humble shrine of Choo-Foo-Tse," said Wang Foo as they entered and took seats in the little study.

"I am honored beyond words in being admitted to the shrine that bears the name of the greatest scholar of the classics," replied the guest.

For two long hours they were closeted together, and the results of their consultations amounted to this: It was not likely that any Chinese official, even of the rank of viceroy, would knowingly give to a European a jewel of such value and such national pride as the famous jade-stone pendant of the dynasty of the Tsings. Therefore, on first thought, what the governor received must have been a cheap duplicate or an imitation, trusting that the European eye would never detect the difference. But no Chinese thief would ever be able to dispose of such a treasure without being instantly apprehended. Therefore, on second thought, the only conclusion was that the viceroy actually did present the genuine pendant to the governor, and then privately arranged for it to be stolen and brought back to him.

The guilty party, whoever he might be, must be sought in the viceregal yamen at Canton. But it must be done with the utmost secrecy, for the exposure of an official of high rank would mean almost certain death to the informer. An immediate trip to Canton and an entree into the inner yamen must be the very first step in tracing the criminal.

"You are quite sure, venerable father," he said to the old ecclesiastic on leaving, "that your description of the jewel is correct?"

"Quite positive," was the answer. "See! Here it is as I copied it today from one of our rarest volumes in the temple library, entitled 'Jewels of the Imperial Line and Sacred Possessions of the Sons of Heaven.' No. 28—The jade-stone pendant, or seal of the Tsing emperors. The most perfect stone ever brought from the imperial jade-stone mines of Shen Si. It measures two inches in length by an inch and three-quarters in width and depth. It is of the clearest green, pure as the waters of the sacred sea. On it are carved the words of the motto of the great Tsings, 'Pure as this stone must ever be the imperial heart.' But that which gives it its priceless value and marks it as the very gift of high heaven to the celestial line is this: That when held up to the direct light of the sun the crystal markings in its center outline the character for 'Tsing' or 'Pure.' There is and can be no other like it in the world."

"It is enough," said Wang Foo. "We are pledged to eternal secrecy?"

"By the oath of the Elder Brotherhood that is never broken," responded

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There was a loud cry and commotion in the outer passage way "A thief, a thief, into the river with him!"